

## TORRENT TIME

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[Several lives were affected by the heavy downpour in Chennai in November-December 2015. Many lost their belongings. Many more lost their wherewithal and stood homeless on the streets. In this dire situation, the selfless service of those involved in sanitation work in the parts affected severely was invaluable. This is a story written in appreciation of these people who oblivious to the cold rain, subjected themselves to suffering for the healthy well-being of others with no expectations whatsoever. The rains have abated in Chennai. Six months later, at a time when normalcy has returned leaving no sign of those terrible days, this story will serve to ruminate on that time.]

### Chapter 1

“Hey Mari, get up ... Hey, get up, I say...”

As if in a dream, from a deep well, sounded the voice. Mari, lying on the rope cot under the neem tree in front of his house, couldn't at once figure out whose voice it was. Sleep stuck stubbornly within his eyelids, not allowing them to open.

“Hey, Mari, Get up, will you?”

Following the insistent sound of the voice, somebody shook him, uncovering the blanket that he was wrapped in. Mari slowly opened his eyes with slumber not really leaving him. A figure wrapped in a blanket was dimly visible.

“Who's that?”

“Me, Velu. How long should I call out to you?”, said Velusami, pulling up the slipping blanket. Mari couldn't understand anything for a few minutes. Wondering why Velu was here at this hour, Mari sat up on his bed, rubbing his eyes.

“Who's that??” he asked as if mumbling to himself.

“It's me, Velu. Brother Pazhani asked me to bring you and your wife. We have to go to Madras urgently...”

“To Madras? At this hour? What's the time now?” said Mari rolling his eyes.

“It's 11 now. We hear that rain has flooded Madras. They have asked for people from here to be brought there to help.”

“What are we going to do there? Will they pay us?” As Mari said that, sleep took leave of his eyes completely.

“Why won't they pay us? Rs.500 a day. Taking off Pazhani's commission, we will get all of Rs.350. There will be work for ten days. Three meals a day, money; the government will provide us clothing.”

“Rs 350 a day? Will they really give us that much, Velu?”

The doubt he saw in Mari's eyes, annoyed Velusami.

“You are always doubting. First get ready to go... The tempo will be here in a quarter of an hour. Twenty-five people from here, twenty-five from Vizhupuram, a total of fifty in Pazhani's

group... Pack up your clothes for ten days, two or three utensils for making porridge in an emergency and be ready. I'll come with the tempo... ." Mari stopped Velu who was all set to leave.

"What work do we do in Madras...?"

"What? We are going to scrub dishes! What a question to ask! The whole city is reeling under rain water. Didn't you see scene after scene they showed on TV yesterday? We are going to help those people. We have to sprinkle bleaching powder all over the city..., we have to clean up the garbage after the rain stops. This is why the government has asked for sanitation workers to come from all the districts; there will be many more like us there. Ok. Now get ready quick," said Velusami as he walked towards the next street.

At once Mari was full of enthusiasm. Rs.350 a day would mean Rs.3500 in ten days. If he took Rasathi along, her share would be Rs. 3500. In just ten days they could return with a whopping Rs.7000. Even if they slogged the entire month here, they would barely earn Rs.5000. They would have to manage their food and living expenses with that. The Government has offered to feed them three times a day and pay them too. Wasn't it sensible to grab such an opportunity?

He woke up Rasathi who was sleeping inside the house and told her about the matter.

"Do I have to come too?" asked Rasathi yawning as she tried to get out of her sleep. He lost his cool.

"What are you going to do staying here? Make pudding and have it? Get ready without asking questions. Velusami will be here soon..."

"Will we get Rs.350 a day? I am not so sure..." The disbelief in Rasathi's words was evident in her eyes.

"You are always full of doubt...the Government itself has asked for us to be brought... can anyone dupe us?"

"Even if the Government gives, Pazhani is bound to cheat us..."

Although there was truth in Rasathi's words, Mari was undeterred. They would go to Madras and return with Rs. 7000. He had already started dreaming about what he would spend the money on. So, he urged Rasathi.

"Look here, child. Don't keep talking now. Get ready."

"What do we do with the children?" asked Rasathi looking at the boys curled up on the mat.

"Don't annoy me, go leave them at mother's house and run back..." he urged.

Mari's mother Pavayi lived in just the next street. On and off in urgent situations, the couple would leave the children with her and go out. Now she woke up the older boy and carried the sleeping younger one on her shoulder, left them there and returned.

By the time she packed a couple of saris, jackets, lungis, towels, a big pot, two small pots, two ladles and got ready, Velusami had already arrived with the tempo. Sanitation workers, men and women from the neighbouring streets numbering about twenty, twenty-five were already in the tempo. Mari and Rasathi got into the tempo. Some were standing, women sat brushing each other. Chulai of the North Street was also there. Rasathi sat down beside her.

Chulai smiled slightly at her.

"What would be the time now, Chulai?"

"When I left home it was 11. We stopped to pick up workers all along the way. It must be 12.30 now," she said.

One of the men who overheard them said, "We'll reach Madras by eight."

The chill winter winds pierced the skin. The tempo raced picking up speed. Wrapping her pallow over her head, Rasathi sat leaning against a corner of the tempo. The broken sleep, the hurtling of the tempo and the cold wind brought back slumber to her eyes.

Mari stood close to her. His mind was unsteady and disturbed. Thoughts of the new place, the new environment brought in a certain excitement. With the jerking movement of the vehicle, the light of the street lamps formed shadows of light and darkness on Rasathi's face making her look like a rustic statuette. The locks curling on her forehead, the mustard seed-sized nose stud, transformed Rasathi's brown complexion to a mango-yellow. He looked at her - sitting with eyes closed, her round sticker bindi, the neat way in which she had bound her hair, her slim figure, - with content.

Wasn't Rasathi the fragrant spring that had wafted into his life? Putting up with his temper tantrums, working shoulder to shoulder with him, running the household frugally, she had even set aside savings for her children's future! Wasn't her hard toil the reason for his building a tiled tenement in the land deed allotted by the Government and leading a decent life?

And now... she had responded to her husband's call without demur.

Mari's mind calculated with the speed of a horse how the earnings from the work of the two could be used. It was his long-standing dream: He would ride to work on a moped like Kicchan, Mani, Kadhiraavan!

Sanitation work went on in many places such as Lalpettai, Thirunagar, Kashi colony, Chenkundram. He had to rely on the town bus to commute from home to these places. If he had a moped, he could reach these places fast, could get off in style! He could take Rasathi and the kids to watch a movie... take them to a park... .

Rasathi did indeed know about this desire of his. Isn't that why she had been saving every pie. The earnings from the Chennai work will definitely go into buying a moped ... and then, a shirt for the older boy... for the younger one a toy jeep that will light up when wound.

Surr...

Mari's train of thought was broken by the van which stopped with a jerk. Those sleeping struck their heads against each other and opened their eyes even without waking up.

## Chapter 2

The vehicle was halted in front of a tea stall

A voice was heard saying "We've reached Vizhupuram. All of you get down. Have coffee etcnd we will then resume our journey." All the men got down hurriedly. Reluctant, the women continued to sit in the bus. Some men slid behind the tea stall

"Choliakka, I need to go to the toilet. Will you come along with me?" said Rasathi, as she bound her braids sprawling on her shoulders. Cholai raised her arms and yawned. Adjusting her slipping pallow, she arose.

The two of them went into the 'pay and use' toilet adjacent to the teashop and returned. Meanwhile Mari had brought two glasses of steaming hot tea for them.

"We will manage to earn something this month. Expenses for Pongal stand lined up. It is the first Pongal after Vasanthi got married," said Cholai as she sipped the hot tea.

"I too came leaving my two kids with my mother-in-law in the hope of earning a few bucks. Brother Pazhanimust oblige and pay us' said Rasathi.

"What's that. I heard my name being mentioned," said Pazhani as he reached there. He was smoking a cigarette as usual. The two were a little taken aback as they did not expect him there.

“Come Uncle, we didn’t notice you. We were saying that if we went to Madras we would be able to set eyes on some money,” said Cholai tactfully.

“I am taking the trouble of bringing you so far only to help you.” As he smiled, Pazhani’s brown teeth were clearly visible even in that dark hour.

Pazhani was sweet only with his words. One couldn’t see anyone worse when it came to money matters. He would engage workers for sanitation contracts and earn money. He would appropriate half the amount. It wasn’t that they didn’t know about all this. But there was no other choice. They had to depend on him. Only he knew where sanitation jobs were available in the place and the nitty-gritty of how to get things done. If one were not friendly with him, one would have to be jobless and die of starvation.

Realising that it wasn’t safe to stay there any longer, Rasathi took Cholai’s hand and drew her away from there. Rasathi could well sense Cholai’s reluctance to move away.

There was some talk about there being something between Cholai and Pazhani. Pazhani’s house was on Redhill. Rasathi knew nothing much about him except that he had got his eldest daughter married off last year. With all his perfume, gold chain and rings, he looked a perfect hero making it hard to believe he had a married daughter. Mari would often say that the wallet that peeped out of his pocket always had 500 Rs notes.

Rasathi was not surprised that Cholai was attracted towards such a person.

Would Cholai be around 40 or 42 years of age? If she had got married in time, she would have had two or three kids by now. She had a good figure kept trim by the sanitation and construction jobs that she was constantly taking up. She powdered her face and used eyeshadow. Rasathi had often wondered at the way her hair remained in place even when she was engaged in hard labour. With a drunken father, a mother who died of typhoid when Cholai was young, three younger sisters and two brothers whom she had settled in life, it was said that she could not have managed so well single-handedly except for the support of people like Pazhani with whom she maintained close relations.

Who knew what secrets lay hidden in abysses? ‘Why do I need to bother about others’ lives’ thought Rasathi as she got on to the tempo.

Meanwhile another tempo with workers from Vizhupuram reached there. Pazhani and the Vizhupuram agent stepped aside and were speaking to each other in private. The men stood smoking under the tree after coffee and tea. The Vizhupuram group too went into the tea shop to have tea and returned.

The two tempos left after about twenty minutes. It was daybreak. The tempos moved directly towards Chennai without halting anywhere else. The weather changed after they crossed Chengulpet. Thick clouds gathered foreboding rain. As a reminder of the heavy rain the previous day, there were pools here and there on the roads.

When Subramani said, “The rain water is as thick as the tea in our Gopu’s tea-stall, the men laughed as if they had heard a great joke.

The tempo slowed down. It began to creep along. The water stagnating in pits and the unevenness of the road slowed down the speed. The hope of reaching Tambaram by eight fell to pieces. The vehicle crept slowly in the absence of street lights, having to manoeuvre pits and mounds.

It was nearing nine by the time they managed to reach Tambaram. Everyone began to feel the pangs of hunger. They were made to rest at a wedding hall in Tambaram. Food was being cooked in a shed behind.

“All of you have your upma and coffee and get ready fast. One group will leave for Mudichur, one for Ashoknagar and one for Velachery. Those are the areas that are the worst affected. All

of you will work in their allotted areas and get back to this hall.” Announcing this, Pazhani set out to divide them into groups.

Everyone hastened to finish their breakfast and join their respective groups. Apart from the two tempos they had come by, there were other trucks there. Pazhani sent another group into a truck. Cholai and Rasathi were in one group, Mari in another.

“Rasathi, take care dear,” said Mari. Cholai responded, “Don’t worry Mari, I’ll take good care of your wife”. Turning towards Rasathi she said, with a smile “How much your husband cares for you even after two kids. You are lucky indeed”

Rasathi’s blushed.

Everyone got into their respective vehicles. Rasathi’s group set off for Velachery. The route to Velachery from Tambaram was fully flooded. In some places on the main roads the water was knee-deep. A few boats ferried people across the water. Rasathi found all this very strange.

She had come to Chennai once before. Her cousin, Trimurthi had got married here. She wondered at how different Chennai was then from what it is now. The speedy traffic obstructing pedestrians, the drone of the low-lying aeroplanes, had all amazed her then. Now the big roads were so deserted... boats moving on ponds of stagnant water, seemed to be a fantasy.

“We’ve reached Velachery, get down” called out the group-leader.

As soon as they had alighted a person came running from somewhere and handed over a packet of face-masks to the leader. The leader opened the packet and distributed the masks to all of them asking them to keep their noses well-covered.

### Chapter 3

A cock crowed at a distance. Pavayi woke up with a start. For the past twenty-five years, she has been awake when the cock crows as if she carried an alarm clock in her head. So was it today. But she wasn’t able to open her eyes as if her eyelids were pressed together by some glue. Her eyes refused to open, however much she tried. She kept lying down. When she heard someone spraying water at the house-front somewhere, she slowly got up from her bed, sat down rubbing her eyes with her hands. Usually, a sprightliness would suffuse her when she woke up. Today she felt very lethargic.

She was surprised when her eyes wandered to the right of her bed. Vimal and Vinod were lying down there. How did they come here? For a second, Pavayi could not understand anything. Who brought them here? For a few minutes, it seemed as if it had happened in a dream. She slowly recollected that her daughter-in-law Rasathi had knocked the door and left the children with her.

It must have been midnight then. When she heard the knock, she had cautiously looked through the window. As she heard Rasathi calling out “It’s me, Rasathi, please open the door,” she anxiously opened the door, without understanding why she had brought the children at this hour.

“Brother Pazhani has sent for us because sanitation workers are urgently needed in Madras. My husband and I will go and return in a week. Please take good care of the kids, aunt ... We’ll call up everyday... Isn’t it good to earn some money? That is why I am going ... Shall I leave, please manage the younger one if he sobs...” said Rasathi as she laid Vinod who was sleeping in her arms on the bed.

The older Vimal, went to his bed on his own sleepily. Even before she could ask for the details, Rasathi hurried away, saying “It’s getting late, aunt, the tempo will be here now. I’ll let you know the rest over phone after we reach Madras. I’ll take leave...”

She shut the door, took two sheets from the almirah and spread them over the children and lay down on a mat, she recalled.

It was Monday and she had to leave early for the school. Even before the teachers came in, she had to sweep the classrooms, fill the pots with drinking water and stand ready at the gate to receive the children. As they were all between three and five years of age, tears would pour down their cheeks as they entered the school. She had to cajole them somehow and take them into the classroom. As soon as they saw her, some children would hide their faces in their mothers' pallow and refuse to even look at her, as if she were a phantom. She would be exhausted by the time she consoled them and brought them in.

By then a few children would ask her to take them to the toilet. She would have to do that. Children force-fed in the hurried morning hours, would throw up as soon as they entered the classroom. She would take them to the bathroom, clean them up, get them to change and bring them back. She had to clean up the soiled floor with phenyl. Thus Pavayi's day would be filled with work until evening. In between, she had to attend to the teachers when they called for her. She had to obey them pleasantly.

With thoughts of her school duties, Pavayi swept her house front, sprayed water, drew patterns with rice flour and went to brush her teeth. It was indeed an additional responsibility to take care of Vimal and Vinod until her son and daughter-in-law returned. Yet she considered it a pleasant duty as she was the only person they could fall back upon.

Vimal is in Class III in the government school two streets away. He gets his morning and afternoon meal at the school. Vinod is three. For the past four months he has been going to the nursery nearby. Making him get up, getting him ready and taking him to the nursery was indeed a difficult job for Pavayi. The younger one was not yet as attached to her as the older one. He was too young. As days go by he'll get closer thought Pavayi as she lit the stove and let the water boil for the rice.

Hearing the sound of water being sprayed, she came out of the door. Next-door Kokila was spraying water on her house front.

"Kokila, do you know that people are being taken from here to clear up the rain-affected areas in Madras. Mari and Rasathi have gone too..."

"Yes, Ramu has also gone from here. I hear they will get Rs.350 a day. Velusami came to fetch him saying there was work for ten days," said Kokila, pausing the spray.

"I was bewildered when Rasathi suddenly came and stood before me last night. She has left my grandsons here and gone. They are sleeping... I have to go to school early today. I am scared about the younger one. He is very naughty..."

"You will be fully occupied for another ten days, for sure." Kokila smiled as she went inside. Pavayi also moved away from there.

She cooked rice and made *rasam*. There was pickle to go with it. She could make *sambar* in the evening, thought she as she woke up Vimal. When he came back after brushing his teeth, she gave him black coffee, "Here drink this" she said.

He frowned as he said, "I want milk coffee. I don't like this..." and returned the glass.

"Your mother has spoilt you enough... You must learn to drink everything. You shouldn't be so choosy. Do you know that at your age your father used to have just water and run to school?" Pavayi opened the door so that she could hear when the milkman rang his cycle bell. Henceforth for ten days she will have to get milk, thought she, as she woke up Vinod.

"Get up dear... it's time for school... get up dear"

Vinod turned over in his bed muttering something.

Somehow she managed to make him get up and brush his teeth.

“I want mother, I want to go to her...” Pavayi lifted the whining child on her shoulders and took him out to watch the goats in the pen as she fed him.

After Vimal left, she got herself and Vinod ready and set off towards the nursery. “When will mother and father come?” Pavayi quietened him by saying they would come the next day.

Thinking of how she would deal with him the next day, Pavayi left him in the nursery and hurried towards her school.

#### **Chapter 4**

Getting out of his house to go to work, Aravindan went to the car park, reversed his Maruti Esteem and came out. The sky had darkened and it seemed as if it would rain.

He had heard the meteorologist predicting heavy rain for the next two, three days in a TV interview. It had been raining intermittently for the past week. The situation was quite bad since Diwali. November and December were indeed annoying months for Chennai. The Government should act responsibly and take precautionary measures. But the official machinery wakes up only after heavy damages. This has been the story of the past several years.

Aravindan drove towards Adayar. There were heavy winds with a slight drizzle. By the time he reached Besant Nagar, the rain got heavier. Just as he parked his car and went in, Choudhary was stepping out.

“Hi, Arvind ... The Vice President wanted you to meet him as soon as you arrived,” said Choudhary.

Choudhary responded with a shrug when Arvind said, “Why now? Meetings are usually after 3..?”

Leaving his laptop in his room, Arvind went to see the Vice President, Ganeshan.

“May I come in, sir?” he said softly as he tapped the door. “Yes, come in” said Ganeshan, dressed immaculately, with rimless glasses, appearing as dignified as was fit for his position.

“Please be seated” said he, pointing to the chair. Arvindan sat down.

“Aravindan, It’s going to pour heavily... There could even be a storm. You know what ... You should go to all the rain-affected places and see how you can help the people. Take the required team with you. The chairman’s order is that the CSR unit should help as many people as possible. You get going immediately. Take the cash needed from Chari. Don’t worry. The help meted out by our company during the floods is very important. Understand?”

Nodding his assent, Arvindan came out of the room.

When he met Rangachari in the Accounts section he was ready with Rs.50000 cash. He signed the voucher and took the cash.

Many staff members in his department hadn’t arrived as yet. They must have left late last night, thought he. Taking his laptop and saying ‘bye’ to Choudhary, he came out, only to find that it was raining very heavily. The rainwater was flowing in rivulets on the road.

He sped towards the office of the Rotary Club Governor, Arumugam. Ganeshan had instructed that whatever help was offered by the company had to be done through a reliable organisation. Hence, for the past several years they had tied up with the Rotary Club for the various welfare schemes they were running. He was meeting Arumugam to know about the rain-affected areas that needed help.

“Our men are working in Tambaram, Mudichur and Velachery. You can choose whichever area you wish to,” said Arumugam. Aravindan chose Tambaram. Rotary members were busy helping to accommodate and catering to the needs of the flood-affected people in the large wedding hall

there. Aravindan offered medical help and called his team members. He contacted his local medical friends on facebook and a couple of doctors arrived.

Aravindan had good friends he could fall back upon wherever he went. He was very sociable. He was appointed team leader of the company's CSR precisely because of this. They had helped thousands of people in the past. They had now come forward to help the flood-affected people.

Aravindan got busy.

## Chapter 5

“Why this mask Cholaiakka?” Cholaiakka turned to Rasathi who asked this and said, “I don't understand anything ...”

Meanwhile each of them was given a broom, a packet of bleaching powder and a pail by the volunteers there. The officials were giving orders.

“Here, collect all the garbage on this road and put it in the bin at that corner. Four or five of you come here... Sprinkle bleaching powder all the way...”

In front of the houses allocated to Rasathi, were mounds of rain-soaked mattresses, broken chairs, damp groceries, rotted vegetables, pieces of bricks retrieved from the debris of buildings that were shattered by the rain. Rasathi swept the road and deposited the heaps of junk in front of the houses into the bin. The damp beds were too heavy to lift.

Stopping by the front of each house, some were collecting the spoilt beds and pillows into a truck. By the time the junk from two or three houses was collected, the garbage van was full. The gloves, unable to withstand the weight of the garbage began to tear. There were no spare gloves available. One had to gather the waste with bare hands. The dust particles got under the nails and were irritating.

The stench of the excreta, napkins, rotted vegetables, groceries washed down by the flood stirred the entrails. Some people were pouring out the water accumulated in the houses onto the road with pails. Each one had a different experience. People were moaning, unable to wipe out the scars left on their lives by the sudden rain.

“The cursed rain...what havoc it has caused ... There was no sign of rain when we went to bed last night. It started raining around midnight. Towards daybreak, there was a sensation of dampness on my back as if a snake was creeping... No electricity either... Touched to find it was water. Before we could figure what it was, the water came flooding in... Oh God!!I've never seen such rain in my lifetime...”

“Have lakhs of money in my bank account... own house... two cars... four or five ATM cards in hand... And yet like a penniless orphan, I had to look up to the helicopters for a packet of food. I cannot forget that moment, Sir. If God wills, a millionaire can be thrown down a garbage heap. This rain has shown us that.” A tall and hefty man was saying this to the officer there.

“All's lost: camera, light... the house documents are all soaked wet ... can't figure out what to do. I have sent my family to my in-laws' place. It will take two or three months to get the house in order and get them back” a photographer was sharing his experience with the volunteers.

“I haven't see rain of this magnitude in my lifetime... there's water all around, as if we were in the midst of a sea,” lamented a shrivelled old woman.

As her ears were flooded with stories of laments, shocks and surprises, Rasathi was disposing the garbage. Her legs were beginning to ache. At about one'o'clock, some people who came in a van distributed a packet of biryani and a packet of water, and hastened away.



Rasathi and Cholai sat under a tree, opened their packets and started having their food. As the packet of water was small they couldn't even wash their hands. As she put a few morsels in her mouth, the stink of the rotten tomatoes left in her hands struck her nostrils and Rasathi felt nauseated. She threw up whatever she had had. She felt she couldn't eat the rest and threw the unfinished packet in the bin. Cholai had an apology of a meal.

In the afternoon, another job awaited them. Half the members of their group were taken elsewhere in a tempo. As the sewage drains were clogged with rubbish washed down by the rain, they had to be cleared first. There too, they were given masks and iron pans.

As a man from the Vizhupuram group, dug at the slush with a spade and threw it into the iron pans, the women carried them and put them in the garbage trucks. The stench of the garbage made one sick, even while they lifted them up. Wondering what the man digging at the slush must be going through, Rasathi looked at his face. He was digging up in a state of drunken stupor.

Drink was the only drug for those engaged in sanitation work. The company of drink was necessary to counter the stench and the waste. There was an illusion that it helped to forget the dirt and the despair of the outside world.

Rasathi felt breathless. Did they get them to Chennai only to wallow in this stench? What a fate that they had to float in this stink to clean up the city and its homes. While she had thought that they were coming here to sweep the streets and scatter bleaching powder, they, in fact, had to toil daylong in this disgusting stench. What else to call it but fate? Why did Mari accept this in greed of Rs. 350. Her eyes welled with tears as she thought that he had dragged her too here. Cursing her fate, she mechanically threw away the waste.

A white van came and stood there at that point. "Galaxy TV" was written against the background of images of mikes. The doors opened, and three or four persons alighted along with cameras and mike equipment.

## Chapter 6

Pavayi was struggling between the anxiety of not hearing from Mari and Rasathi for more than a day after they left, and the sadness of not being able to manage the sobbing of Vinod.

Rasathi would often leave him with her for a few hours when they went out for weddings, other functions or the hospital. But he had never been alone with her for a whole day.

On the way from school in the evening he began nagging her with, "Has mother returned, grandma?"

She kept consoling him saying, "It is raining heavily in Madras... There are no buses, they say. Mother called to say she would come tomorrow. If you behave well she promised to bring a new shirt for you..."

"I want Poppins too. A packet for me and one for my brother."

"She said she would get you toffees too. If you behave well she said she would take you to the park too."

"Grandma, there is big tiger model in the park. I will sit on it and play. I will take you too."

Sensible and jovial all along the way, Vinod started his refrain again after they reached home,

"Grandma, I must see mother at once, take me to her..."

She left him to play with the neighbours' kids and try to contact Mari on his cell-phone. The phone was dead.

"Sister! What are you doing with your cell-phone. Can't speak to Mari? Connectivity to Madras has been disrupted. Couldn't speak to Ramu either... Things will be restored only after all the

rain water has receded. They announced it on TV. Didn't you watch?" Kokila's daughter Sulochana spoke as she passed by.

Pavayihad a TV set given freely by the Tamil Nadu Government. But she seldom watched it. The sound of serials would start in the evenings. She wasn't even a wee bit eager to watch the serials full of cries, aggressive dialogues, and provocations to anger. She somehow disliked the stories full of loud, emotional conflicts between in-laws.

She would cook in the evenings after she returned from work. She would chat with the neighbours. She would watch just the news on TV. Some days she would go to the temple. She would visit her grandchildren. Else, the family would come home, have dinner and leave.

After having dinner at eight, she would clean up the kitchen and go to bed. Right at the stroke of five in the morning she would be up. This was her routine since the time of her husband.

She had forgotten to watch the news as she was struggling to manage Vinod. She went into the kitchen, made two wheat flour dosas for Vimal, and placing two on the plate, she walked towards Vinod.

Engrossed in playing with Murali of the family opposite, Vinod did not pay attention to her call. When she tried to feed him with dosa bits, he refused to eat and ran away. She couldn't run after him and didn't know what to do.

He'll come back when hungry, thought she and returned home.

She hadn't felt such struggle when she brought up her only son, Mari. He grew up somehow. Since he wasn't good at studies, she had sent him for construction work with her husband. When he was twenty-five, she got him married to Rasathi. Her luck fetched him jobs in the sanitation departments in Government offices. He left at 10 in the morning and returned home at 5 in the evening. As far as Pavayi was concerned, she felt he was in a good job. Rasathi would also occasionally go for sanitation work.

On the land allotted by the Government for sanitation workers, Rasathi, with her father's help had managed to raise four walls around with an asbestos roof and call it a house.

Although sad about living away from her son, she did appreciate her daughter-in-law's smartness.

Rasathi did invite her to stay with them several times, saying that this house could be let out. But Pavayi had declined.

This was a piece of land bought during her husband's time. He had raised four walls, fixed the tile-roof, and partitioned the space for the kitchen and the bedroom. She wanted to spend her lifetime there. She had the helper's job in hand. She was able-bodied enough.

They were young... let them live as they pleased. As long as it was possible, she would live alone. They could consider when she grow older and couldn't manage on her own. Besides, she didn't want to be a burden on her son and daughter-in-law.

"Grandma, I'm hungry..." When Vinod came running and lay down on her lap, she shook herself out of her thoughts.

"Come let's eat dosa..." she took him in with her.

She got him to bed after he finished his meal. Vimal finished his homework and lay down beside him. After cleaning up the kitchen, she too lay down beside him.

Having toiled the whole day, she soon fell asleep.

When she woke up in the morning, she could hear Vinod moaning, "Mother, mother" when she gently touched him, he was warm. When she touched his forehead, she found it hot with fever.

## Chapter 7

The people engaged in the sanitation work were at a loss. Why were there so many people with cameras and mikes? They looked at them with wonder. They had often watched political leaders and film stars being interviewed on television. They guessed that there may be some political leader here that they wanted to interview.

“The TV people have come. They will photograph us too...” said Tavasi, grinning.

“Yeah, they are waiting to photograph your handsome face.” Everyone laughed out when Nayakar’s wife, Saroja said this. Tavasi looked sheepish.

Meanwhile the television staff met the volunteers from the Rotary and Lions clubs and were taking down notes. As the cameraman was adjusting the angle of his lens, another person was holding the light in front of him. The camera moved recording the ponds and puddles, overflowing garbage bins, the heaps of junk in front of the houses, wet beds, vegetable rot ....

After a while, the mike was handed over to the volunteers. They were responding to the questions posed by the reporter.

The workers had stopped working, and were enthusiastically watching the shooting. It was a novel experience for them- like watching a film shooting.

The lights went out after the interview. The cameraman and the reporter came towards them.

“Where have you all come from?” asked the tall reporter.

“They have come from Trichy, Lalgudi, Perambalur, Thuraiyur, Vizhupuram and other places,” replied a volunteer.

“Gentleman,” said the reporter addressing an elderly person in the crowd,” What work are you doing here? Do you know why you are here in Chennai?

“We heard that heavy rain had flooded Madras and that the Government had asked for sanitation workers to be brought from several places for assistance. We left last night and reached here this morning.” The crowd listened to what he said with interest.

“Get a few bytes from the ladies,” said the reporter with the cap.

“One of you, please speak. Give us your opinion.” The reporter turned towards the women.

None of the women volunteered to speak. A few turned away abashedly.

“Don’t be afraid. Just come and speak,” said the reporter and Cholai pushed Rasathi to the fore.

“You speak, Rasathi. You have gone to high school . You speak.”

Rasathi faced the camera and spoke hesitantly.

“We were asked to come to help clean up rain-beaten Chennai. We are clearing up the garbage heaps, we are sprinkling bleaching powder on the streets.

“You are doing this with bare hands. Isn’t it difficult?

“Can we feed ourselves if we think of the difficulty? The streets are full of soaked beds, pillows, groceries and vegetables. Can’t go near them. It is nauseating. Yet it has to be done. Can we shrink from all this when we come to work?”

Everyone applauded what Rasathi said. The lights went out and the camera moved.

“You spoke well and pointedly, Rasathi” appreciated Cholai. Rasathi smiled coyly.

At last, the day’s work was over. They got into the tempo and waded through the rain-water puddles, the pits and mounds of the streets. It was eight when they reached the wedding hall.

Mari too seemed to have arrived just then. He seemed very tired too. The day’s toil had shrivelled him. He didn’t speak a word to Rasathi. He sat in a corner as if there was nothing to be said.

They were given porridge in plastic glasses for dinner. Rasathi fetched two glasses and gave one to Mari. He drank it in one gulp. She drank hers too, spread a sheet and sat down.

The huge TV screen in the hall displayed images of the flood-affected areas of Madras. A young lady in shirt and trousers was explaining the causes for the flood. In between, many people gave their views. Some were wailing about their lost possessions. Images of a few walking in neck-deep water holding their children above their heads were repeatedly shown. Everyone was watching TV as they reclined or as they drank their porridge. Suddenly, Rasathi's face flashed on TV. "My, it's our Rasathi" cried someone aloud. Mari, who had lain down in fatigue, got up. His face brightened as he saw Rasathi on television.

## Chapter 8

Rasathi couldn't believe it was she herself. The appearance of Cholai near her confirmed it.

"Look, I am on television," she said to Mari excitedly.

Forgetting all his fatigue, Mari stared at the TV. Rasathi appeared prettier on screen.

"Look, our Rasathi is speaking on television," shouted Velusami who was lying down at a distance.

All of them got up at once and were eager to listen to Rasathi. A few watched it reclining.

Rasathi's interview was shown. They listened to Rasathi's response with interest.

"Can we feed ourselves if we think of the difficulty? The streets are full of soaked beds, pillows, groceries and vegetables. Can't go near them. It is nauseating. Yet it has to be done. Can we shrink from all this when we come to work?"

After Rasathi's words, the reporter took the mike:

"These women who have come from several places are helping clean Chennai, ignoring their own health hazards. They are doing their best to clear all the refuse heaped up on the streets. Their service is no less than that of the Government and the volunteers. We can only express our deep sense of gratitude to these people who have plunged into the field for the well-being of people who are strangers to them. This is Saravanan of Galaxy TV speaking from Velachery."

After the event, there was loud applause. Some whistled.

"You did extremely well, Rasathi," shouted Narayana Maistri from the Upper Street.

Rasathi felt embarrassed. Mari pressed her hand with delight. So many people came to her and praised her in so many words.

Her heart was suffused with the pride that even she was able to help the grieving people in some small way.

For half an hour, everyone was talking about the TV programme approvingly. They looked at the people interviewed as if they were recipients of the President's medal.

The din subsided, the lights went off and the hall fell into silence.

Mari and Rasathi were lying down next to each other with a gap. In the darkness, Mari's hands went around Rasathi and held her in his clasp.

"I am very proud, dear. I am very lucky that you are my wife," whispered Mari.

"Move away, someone might be watching," Rasathi withdrew coyly from his grasp.

Soon she could hear Mari snoring softly. For some reason, she couldn't fall asleep.

Chill winds outside forebode imminent rain. The hall was in darkness most of the time because of intermittent power failures. Mosquitoes buzzed and tasted blood even when covered fully. Rasathi couldn't sleep. New place, new surroundings, mosquito bites, the cold, all together had stolen her sleep. Mari was happily sleeping with the fatigue of the day's labour and the body ache.

Even when the voices of the people lying down in the hall had faded and everything fell silent, Rasathi couldn't sleep.

When she went to bed last night she had not imagined that she would have to sleep in this hall here amidst so many others. Why did she have to rush here leaving behind the kids? ... work in the stench, shiver in the chill, bear mosquito bites? Wonder how her mother-in-law managed the kids! At least the older one would understand the situation, if explained. It was difficult to manage the younger one.

Rasathi was furious with Mari. She should have just let Mari come. Was it wrong to have come impulsively just because Mari wanted her to? It wasn't even possible to call her mother-in-law and talk to her and kids for solace. There was no network connectivity for the past week in Chennai. Rasathi had tried to contact Pavayi on her cell-phone several times, in vain. No network at all. Along with the misgiving that she couldn't tell her mother-in-law about their whereabouts, the anxiety about her children greatly disturbed her.

Wasn't it the need for money that was the cause? Rasathi felt that she too had fallen a slave to money like everyone else. Wasn't it the fact that money was more important than her children that had brought her this far? What had stopped her from declining Mari's request for her to go along? Wasn't it avarice?

Although such thoughts ran wild in her mind, she also understood the justification for having come here.

Was it wise to let go of this opportunity to earn money righteously through the sweat of one's toil? Although her children would miss her initially, they would gradually get attached to their grandmother.

Just about ten days. They will flit by in a flash. Her mind was constantly engaged in weighing the pros and cons of her decision.

## Chapter 9

The group that went to Mudichurhad arrived only an hour after the Velachery group. Mudichur was the worst-affected, it was said. Those who returned tired after a hard day's work sat down and rested here and there. Some kept narrating stories after stories. Mari felt a burning sensation in the interstices of his toes. He reclined against the wall with legs stretched out. Rasathi brought him some tea.

Tea was always ready in a huge steel filter. Tea was an elixir to people like them engaged in hard physical labour. It was enough if tea could be had every two hours. If its warmth touched the throat, it was enough. The work would go on by itself. As if they knew this, the volunteers kept refilling hot tea until eight at night.

Sipping the tea, they kept talking about their experiences.

"The water is flowing like a river. Not being able to distinguish between a pit and a mound, I fell down many times. It is supposed to be the capital of Tamil Nadu. Our Lalgudi roads are better than these Madras roads..."

"I can't forget today's incident for ages: They took us by a tempo and dropped us at some street. 'If there is a blockage, open it up.' The Government men said that and left. I was digging against the flowing current with a shovel. Someone grazed past me. I was shaken when I looked around to see who it was... . It was the corpse of a well-built man clad in a shirt and trousers. It was lashed down the water. I shook all over. Wonder whose son it was? He had got trapped in the rain. I couldn't work after seeing a corpse at such close range... . The biryani served at

lunchtime wouldn't go down the throat. Even now I am trembling at the thought of it." As Samikannu from Vizhupuram narrated, the others heard him in a state of shock.

"Did you see the armymen ferrying the people stuck in the high-rise apartments in the fourth street to safety? They were all screaming with their hearts in their mouths. All those people had cars at home. Of what avail? In some houses even the cars were afloat... Torture! Nobody would have imagined that Madras would see such a plight.

"Wonder what the Government does with the taxes it collects from the people! If they were repair the potholes on the roads and clear the sewage passages once a year, it would be more than enough."

"Our people are also irresponsible... . You wouldn't imagine the trash I pulled out from the gutters. So many plastic covers, napkins... heaped like a mountain." Our Ramanan has been constantly forecasting the times when rain is imminent. If they had set everything in good repair before that, the damage wouldn't have been this bad."

As each one spoke what they felt voicing the conscience of the people, some others were listening with interest. The volunteers too joined in the discussions.

"As far as Chennai goes, all the areas that were ponds, lakes and pools once upon a time have been appropriated and buildings raised upon them. The whole city is full of high-rise buildings and commercial complexes. The Government gives licences, turning a blind eye to everything. Engineering colleges have come up on several acres in the suburbs. Who gave them permission for all this? What's the use of talking about all this now? If all the water bodies had been kept in good condition, such damage could have been avoided..." A volunteer spoke with anguish.

"Man cannot ever go against nature... if we think we can destroy nature and live, nature will destroy us. The rain from the skies should fall on the earth and flow into ponds and rivers without obstruction. Where's the scope for this here? If all the rain tracks are captured and buildings constructed, where will it flow? That is why, it has stagnated within the city itself... it has entered the houses. Water, wind, ether, fire and earth are the five spirits that protect us... If we play with them, this is the damage that will ensue... The five spirits are our living gods. You shouldn't sin against the gods..." The fairness of Tamarind Grove Peryasami's words as he tapped his cheeks touched the hearts of his listeners.

There was profound silence for a few minutes. As everyone started murmuring their experiences and sharing their thoughts, time passed like a melting candle. With the volunteers sitting down with them and chatting, there was no room for differences in status. The talk continued until the aroma of the *sambar* from the backyard kitchen provoked their appetite.

"Food is ready. All of you have it and go to bed. The tempo will arrive at seven in the morning..." As the agents announced to their respective groups, everyone walked towards the backyard to have dinner.

Mari couldn't even get up. His legs were aching severely. "My legs are aching dear..., there seem to be sores between the toes for having stood in the water and worked... The interstices of the toes are aching terribly..." Mari moaned holding his legs; Rasathi was pained.

She asked him to stretch his legs and examined his toes. There were blisters between the toes as if a fungus had spread. If it had been at home, she would have mixed turmeric powder in coconut oil and applied it. What could she do here?

"I'll be back," said she and went out of the hall. Aravindan and his friends were on the bench outside, chatting.

“Can I get some medicine for toe blisters? My husband’s feet are sore because he stood in the rain water all day. He is writhing in pain...” she said in a pleading tone.

“You have a medical camp there... Wait, I will get you Saibal myself. We have pills too if someone runs temperature... Ask them to get it from here...” Aravindan moved towards the tent-like partition as he spoke.

## Chapter 10

Aravindan handed over a packet containing an ointment for toe blisters, fever, headache pills, paracetamol tablets, a coconut oil vial, band-aid packets, to Rasathi.

He was strangely reminded of his sister Radhika when he looked at Rasathi. If Rasathi were to be taken to a beauty parlour, her hair trimmed to shoulder length, and rinsed with shampoo and made to get a modern look, she would closely resemble Radhika. Radhika and he were friends more than siblings. Radhika, who had finished her engineering and worked in a software company, had got married just last year. As her husband was based in the US; she had quit her job here and settled down in the States.

Rasathi’s sense of responsibility, care for her husband, and intelligence touched him. Radhika was like that too... very caring of her family and brother. She would be greatly disturbed if he was not well. She would take him to the doctor herself. She would get him medicines from the chemist’s. The difference in age between them was just two years, though. Aravindan saw shades of Radhika in Rasathi. Radhika would push aside the locks on her forehead every now and then. Rasathi too did that.

He couldn’t forget the natural way in which she had described the situation in the interview yesterday. He had wanted to meet and appreciate her then. But there wasn’t an opportunity for that. When he saw her so closely, he didn’t want to miss the chance of appreciating her. “I heard you speak on TV yesterday, sister. It was very good. The Government should do more for sanitation workers like you. I don’t have enough words to express my appreciation of people like you who have left their home and hearth and come here to toil.” Rasathi was pleased with his honest praise. She felt a little shy too.

For some reason her eyes brimmed with tears when he addressed her as sister.

“Did you watch television?” she asked gently.

“Yes... it was super. How many children do you have? Is Lalgudi your hometown?” He asked her a series of questions.

“My mother’s place is near Madurai. After I got married, I moved to Lalgudi... two kids. We have left them with my mother-in-law. The elder one is in Class III. The younger one is three years old. He goes to the nursery. In the hope of earning some money we came away at night even without taking leave of them.” The candidness so typical of village women flowed in her speech.

“Will your kids stay without you?”

“True, they will miss me... What’s to be done? Just ten days. My mother-in-law will manage somehow” she smiled with openness.

“Don’t hesitate to ask if you need any medicines. I am just here. After you all leave in the morning, I go around Mudichur, Velachery supervising the work and return here.” He spoke without being asked anything.

“Are you a Government officer?” When Rasathi asked him this wide-eyed, Aravindan burst out laughing.

“I am working in a private software company. I have come on behalf of my company to help the rain-affected people. This is called Corporate Social Responsibility.” She nodded as she smiled, though she did not understand what he said.

“Thanks brother, see you.”

“Don’t hesitate to ask if you need any help.”

She gently rubbed the ointment between Mari’s toes and covered his legs with a sheet. Her heart was filled with discomfort as she bemoaned the lot of having to work standing in the slush and swamp. She should at least get her sons educated and see them settled well in life ... like the brother she had just met, she said to herself. If they had been a little educated, they would not have had to suffer like this, thought she, as she lay down to rest.

## Chapter 11

The next morning, when she woke up, Mari had high temperature. He was shivering. Rasathi made a porridge with the rice she had brought with her as a standby for an emergency in the backyard for him. He couldn’t have even two mouthfuls. He shrank and bundled himself up. Rasathi asked him not to go to work that day. She said that she too would stay back with him. But Mari didn’t agree. He did not wish to forgo the money she would earn.

“I will be OK if I rest a little. You go to work. I will manage on my own,” said he to her.

Everyone had their wash in the bathroom in the hall. Some couldn’t do that either.

“There wasn’t any water in the tap Rasathi... I asked the person there to get me a mug of water and just about washed my face,” moaned Cholai.

“The city is in flood. But there is no water for us for a bath. This is the state of the city,” laughed Muthu, who belonged to their town.

Rasathi was surprised that he could laugh even in such a dire situation.

They were taken to Ashok Nagar that day.

Here too they cleaned up the garbage just as they had done in the rain-affected areas of Ikkaduthangal and Guindy the previous day. The rain had stopped completely. The sun had come out bright. Yet in some parts the water had not receded. The traffic that had been stopped near Kasi theatre Bridge had resumed. People came in hordes on bikes, and on foot to watch the water in spate in the Adayar river.

The police were engaged in standing guard to avert any untoward happening caused by people peeping into the water from the bridge above. Their work eased as it got hotter and hotter. But the unbearable stench whirled in the lungs, the liver and other internal organs through the nostrils. Rasathi kept accumulating the fluid and kept spitting it out to get rid of the odor. You can’t be in a fishmarket and keep away from the smell, can you?

We have left home and come away in greed of money. What is the point in blaming oneself? Desensitised, everyone was working like an ox. Some politicians came around now and then to supervise their work. The women found it annoying to watch them in clean white clothes patting each other and shaking hands as if they themselves had personally swept and cleaned the city.

“Let them stand in this stink and work for some time ... They will understand then. Is it enough to shake hands and move away?” An agent came and glared at the woman who had said this aloud.

“Yes, Kannamma, you seem to be getting cheeky. Do you want to be paid, or do you want to go back penniless?” When he said this in a voice of authority, Kannammal moved away from there.



You couldn't antagonise the agents. If you spoke anything against them, that was the end. You couldn't see money. People like Rasathi knew this only too well. Even if there was some, scandal, they would look around, make sure there was none in earshot and talk among themselves in secret.

Somehow, when she finished work and returned in the evening, Mari's fever had subsided. His face had brightened after the daylong rest. His face was clear. Rasathi felt relieved only after she saw this.

## Chapter 12

Generally Saturday is the pay-day for sanitation workers. Since early morning the workers in the hall were talking expectantly.

"Today is pay-day, you remember? It has been six days since we arrived here. Each of us has to get 3500 according to the calculation. Why can't Sivasundaram be seen yet?" enquired a member of the Vizhupuram group.

Rasathi guessed that Sivasundaram must be their agent. Her eyes unconsciously sought Pazhani. He was nowhere in sight.

Today, work was in Velachery. Everyone got in as the tempo arrived. Sprinkling bleaching powder in every road was the job. The next job was clearing the water and the damaged goods from the temple with an asbestos roof on the main road.

They returned after the day's work with weakened limbs and dimmed eyes, only to find a power failure. As there was no electricity since afternoon, the cooks unable to cook anything stood outside on the road. The volunteers returning from the various areas were informed of this.

"Be a little patient. We won't have electricity today. We will get all of you bread and jam from outside," said one of them. An elderly person from the Vizhupuram group came forward pushing aside the crowd.

"Did you bring us all the way to make us starve to death? We've toiled the day through with tired limbs and sagging strength. You can't even serve us some porridge?"

The volunteers were shaken by his voice full of hunger and anger. Someone came running to calm the senior person.

"Forgive them, sir. Unexpectedly the power broke down. They will soon get some bread... Please be calm..."

"How can we be calm. We have left behind our children and families. For what purpose? To help the people here and earn a few bucks. It seems your city courtesy is to starve people who have come to help you. We have cleaned your city. You don't care if our health is spoilt. We have cleared the stinking heaps of garbage. We will come to know our state of health only after we return home. It was our mistake that we were tempted by a little earning. It was our mistake indeed. We are not used to eating bread. We want a proper meal, or else give us porridge. We won't have anything else." As the senior person spoke with pointed bluntness, the others stood by him.

The volunteers were nonplussed. They didn't know what to do. To salvage the situation, Aravindan got some Petromax lights and sturdy candles. They arranged to get *upma* prepared in the hotel of a prominent person. Those who wished could have bread and jam, they were told. Everyone quietened down.

Relieved that they had dealt with the problem, Aravindan and his mates sat on the bench outside. Within two hours the *upma* with coconut chutney arrived. The *upma* was like an elixir to those who had waited in hunger.

It seemed like it would rain at night. Clouds gathered like a woman's long, dark tresses. Steaming hot tea arrived. The volunteers were running around to keep them happy.

It was a novel experience for Rasathi. She had not enjoyed such hospitality either at her maternal home or her in-laws' place. Before she got married, she would have her food only after she had fed her sisters. After she got married she was content with cooking for Mari and her kids. "Sister, can we serve you some more *upma*?" The solicitude of Aravindan and his young team was very touching. It was touching to find that there were people to extend warm hospitality even to sanitation workers like them.

After dinner, some of them relaxed on the outside verandah playing a game of cards. Some stretched themselves on the ground and chatted. Rasathi and Cholai sat on the verandah steps with their legs down. Mari was strolling to and fro.

"It will definitely rain tonight, dear. Look at the sky... not a spot of a star," said Mari looking up at the sky.

"If it continues to rain hereafter, people will be put to trouble," said Cholai, opening her little pouch and taking out her betel leaf bundle.

"Is it betel leaf from our place?"

In the haste of leaving at midnight I forgot to get my betel leaf box. I asked a brother here to get it for me," said Cholai as she plucked the stalk of each leaf and wiped it clean on her sari. She took out betel nuts from a packet in the pouch, applied a little chalk on to the leaves and deftly flipped them into her mouth.

"Would you like some, Rasathi?"

"I am not used to it sister, the teeth will get stained," Mari looked with pride at Rasathi as she said this.

"Rasathi is very hygiene-conscious, sister. She will go to bed only after brushing her teeth at night," said Mari.

"I can't give up this betel leaf habit Mari. My mouth craves for it after I have my food. Can't do without having betel leaves," said Cholai as she spat the juice on to the ground.

"Yes, Cholaiakka. You seem to have had betel leaf and nuts... looks as if you have come for a feast. Seem to be very happy..." teased someone from the Vizhuppuram group.

"Who will feed us like this? We have to earn, cook food and eat by ourselves..." said Cholai and continued, "Well, I hear your group got paid today?"

"Yes sister, It's Saturday today. We went as a group to the agent and managed to get our dues until today. Didn't your group get paid today?"

"We couldn't get to see Pazhani since this morning. He seems to have disappeared knowing we will ask for money. When we asked Velu, he shut us up saying we will be paid only at the end of ten day. It will be ten days only next Wednesday. We have to wait for that. What if it gets delayed by four days. What we have earned is ours," said Cholai long-windedly.

"True, instead of getting paid fully on the last day and leave for home, our men took the money today itself. Half of them have gone in search of Tasmak with the money. Incurable group!" speaking disgustedly, he moved away. "I am feeling sleepy, I'll go to bed, sister" he said.

The three of them kept staring at the sky for some time. The cold was piercing. They went into the hall and lay down in the space where they had kept their belongings.

Around midnight, it started pouring. The wind whirled through the window. Lightning and thundered vied with each other. The whole hall was plunged in darkness as there was no power.

Oblivious of the rain, many of them were snoring away. Although she was lying down with eyes closed, Rasathi couldn't sleep. Raindrops fell lightly upon through the closed window. She covered herself fully with the sheet. The rain lasted for more than an hour. "Suddenly, she heard someone screaming, "Alas, my money, my money." There was the sound of someone running hurriedly. Shrieks of "Catch him, catch him" rent the silence of the darkness.

At once Rasathi shook off her coverlet and sat up. There was a blanket of darkness all around. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. In the light of the cell-phone she could see a few people standing at a distance. She was struck when she noticed that Mari was not there in the bed next to hers. She quickly got up from her bed. She saw four or five people running casting the torchlight along the way.

She crept out like a cat taking care not to lay her feet any of those lying down. In the verandah, four or five people were together battering a man. It was drizzling outside.

"Please leave me alone... I will give back the money, leave me..." the scream sounded faintly with the cries.

"We too have come here to eke our living like you. How dare you show your skill with us... We've left our home and come here to earn a little money and you try to rob us here, you rascal," said someone; there was the sound of pounding.

"Let him alone, let him alone. He did not know what he was doing." Some people entered the crowd and brought him out.

"Such people should not be allowed to go scot-free, Samikannu. We should hand him over to the police. He knew of the Vizhupuram group being paid today and has done this. He has spoilt the name of our town. Does one behave like this in a place where we have come to earn money honourably through hard work? Only money earned through labour will stay with us..." Rasathi knew that the loud voice was Mari's.

By then, many people had gathered there. Prolonged statements, explanations, the sobs of the man caught - all ended after a while and the crowd dispersed. Moving away from the crowd, Mari spotted Rasathi and came near her. Water was dropping from his head.

"Did you too wake up? Do you know what happened, dear? I went behind to relieve myself. I saw someone sitting by the light of the cell-phone. Puzzle at someone sitting there at midnight, I went near and found it was our Veerasami. You know what he was doing? He was ripping open the cloth bag of a Vizhupuram worker, taking out the money and putting it into his trouser pocket. I went noiselessly from behind and pressed him down like one would a hen... He was trying to escape..." Mari kept narrating.

"That's enough Mari... get going. It was a mistake. We will take care..." someone calmed him down.

Aravindan, who was watching all this racket, came straight towards Mari. He shook Mari's hands tightly. "You caught the man who tried to steal hard-earned money red-handed. You deserve to be appreciated..." said he.

Rasathi and Mari were delighted.

"This brother was the one who gave us medicines yesterday. A very nice person... Very helpful..." Rasathi introduced Aravindan to Mari. Mari smiled at him.

"Sister, don't praise me too much. I need to get him an award for his courageous act..." Aravindan was greatly impressed by Rasathi and Mari.

Their company offered financial help for the education of poor children every year. They had also adopted several children and educated them.

Aravindan, immediately decided to write a letter to his company chief recommending that they take up the funding of the education of the children of Rasathi and Mari. He also wanted to try and get Rasathi and Mari this year's award for the best social welfare workers. His chief would not refuse anything he asked for.

Rasathi came to the hall along with Mari.

Rasathi couldn't sleep even after the din had died down. She was proud of Mari. Shouldn't steal even if you struggled for money; should live by hard work. Should be honest and straightforward. Such were his inborn qualities. It was because of this that she who had gone up to high school had whole-heartedly agreed to get married to uneducated Mari.

Many of the sanitation workers working with them would spend all their money in drinking and Biryani-curry. But Mari would hand over his whole salary to her. Wasn't she lucky indeed to have got such a husband?

### **Chapter 13**

Pavayi didn't know what to do. She powdered half a fever pill that she had put by for an emergency, put it into Vinod's mouth and gave him water to drink.

Which doctor could she take him to so early in the morning? The paediatrician who was on Reddy Street would come only at 11am. This pill would hold till then... she thought as she got busy getting the food ready.

She washed the broken rice and made porridge. She got a sprig of coriander leaves from Chellammal's vegetable shop in the street corner.

She washed the coriander, fried the black gram, four red chillies, a little grated coconut, and a gooseberry-sized ball of tamarind and ground them into a chutney. That was enough for midday. Porridge and coriander chutney was very good for the feverish boy. But he has to have it, will he?

Vinod was still moaning in bed. Vimal went to school as usual. Pavayi was inexpressibly sad that the lively Vinod was lying shrunken in bed.

He should get well before her son and daughter-in-law returned. If not, they will be very upset. "Mother God, if the child recovers from the fever, I will offer a milk-pot" she prayed mentally as she tied a rupee coin in a yellow strip of cloth.

While on the one hand, she was worried about the child's health, on the other, the worry of how she would excuse herself from her school duty scared her. It was not so easy to get leave from the headmistress. Even if she suffered from cough and cold, she would say sternly, "Don't say you are not well and stay away from work. Take some medicine and come to work. It will be difficult to manage the children without you."

If she were to say that she was taking leave because her grandson was ill, she would surely jump up and down. Pavayi was working in the kitchen helplessly.

Even if the temperature went down a bit she would leave Vinod with Kokila and run to school. But the temperature would just not subside. What could she do?

Pavayi was indeed getting confused at not being able to come to any decision. She had her bath, changed and gently woke up Vinod.

"Darling, do get up. Have a little porridge and lie down. We'll go to the doctor after 10. Please get up dear..."

Vinod refused to open his eyes. The body temperature didn't decrease even a wee bit. She gently laid him on her lap. She patted his cheeks to wake him up. But no... It was of no use. She sat there for a while not knowing what to do.

She could surely not go to school today. It was not right to leave him in this state. What should she do? She quickly took the cell-phone placed on the TV stand and pressed the numbers to call the headmistress. After a long while, “Yes, Pavayi, what’s the matter?” responded the harsh voice of the headmistress.

“Madam, I can’t come to school today. My grandson has fever. His body is real hot. His parents have left him with me and gone to Chennai. I have to take him to the doctor. Please give me leave for a day...” fumbled Pavayi.

“What’s this Pavayi? You are telling me now that you can’t come. How do I manage the children?”, The headmistress dithered at the other end as if her head would burst.

“I am asking for leave in the most desperate situation. I will come tomorrow without fail... Please bear with it for just today, madam” she pleaded.

The headmistress abruptly disconnected as if the flames of her fury had spread to her fingers.

If it had been some other day, Pavayi would have been flustered and run to school. But she was not able to do that now. She took the five-hundred note kept under her saris in the almirah and put it in her purse. She picked up Vinod on to her shoulders. She locked up the house, and took an auto at the street corner and rushed to the clinic on Reddy Street.

The doctor examined him and said that he needed to be given glucose immediately. Pavayi was stunned.

#### **Chapter 14**

Aravindan had returned from his rounds supervising the work of the sanitation workers. Some were suffering from nausea, dizziness and fever not being able to adjust to the new place and the new environment. He gave them the required medicines and arranged for bread and milk to be given to them. Some had come with just the clothes they were wearing. He asked for them to be given new garments.

Although he took care of every detail, they complained of not getting one thing or the other. He had to fulfil their rightful demands with a pleasant face.

He would always maintain accounts of every penny he spent. The thought of spending the money as he pleased because it was the company’s money never crossed his mind even a whit.

When he thought of yesterday’s incident he smiled unconsciously. As he was supervising the work at Velachery, he felt someone touching him from behind and turned. A worker was standing with a lungi on his waist and a vest on his chest. He could have been about 40 or 45 years of age. It seemed as if the man was hesitating to say something. “Would you like to have something?” he asked.

With great hesitation and in a voice that only Aravindan could hear, he said...”Can I get a drink at night. I am used to having it every night. Find it difficult to be active without it...” Aravindan got very angry. With difficulty he controlled himself.

“Drinks are not good for health. If you want something to eat I will readily get it for you. You can’t get stuff here...” said he sternly. The man went back with head hung down.

“Only when they get over this habit, will they be able to improve their standard of living,” thought he, as he left the place.

Porridge and brinjal curry was getting ready in the hall for dinner that night. Aravindan was walking up and down in front of the hall. His cell-phone suddenly rang. It was divine music to the ears after a week of not getting to hear its sound. He took the phone from his pocket and put it to his ears. It was Vice-President Ganeshan at the other end.

“Just today we got a call from our Netherlands client. They’ve asked if the project could be completed within a day or two. It seems it is slightly urgent. Can you come to the office tomorrow? Do you have something important there?” said he.

“No sir, I will be in office tomorrow,” said he as he put down the phone and decided to go home immediately. It was a week since he had met his parents. If he went home and slept well, he would be able to go to work in the morning, refreshed.

The sanitation workers would leave for their hometowns in a day or two. He too didn’t have much work here. The rain had stopped too. There were a number of jobs lined up for him at work. He went in to fetch his bag of clothes.

He came out taking leave of his team-mates and rotary friends. He suddenly stopped feeling he had forgotten something. Oh my... upset by the thought that he was going without taking leave of the Rasathi-Mari couple, he went into the hall where they were staying. They were talking to each other leaning against the pillar there.

Approaching them, Aravindan said, “Sister, I am leaving for home. I have got orders to report to office tomorrow. I need to go home, have dinner cooked by my mother and go to sleep. I am very happy to have met you.”

“We will never forget all the help you gave us, brother...” Mari said with a voice quivering with emotion as he rose. Rasathi got up too.

“Whenever you need any help, call me on this number. I am going to send a mail asking our company’s owner to bear all the expenses of your children’s education. Our relationship doesn’t end with this. It will grow further. Shall I take leave?” said he as he handed his visiting card to Rasathi.

“Farewell brother, we will definitely call up”, they sent him off with folded hands.

## Chapter 15

Mari and Rasathi had their porridge and relaxed on the open ground. The sky shone in the thick blackness. Stars twinkled here and there. Mari’s cell-phone too responded to this with a mutter. Hearing his cell-phone sound after a week he at once put it to his ear.

“How are you, mother? How are the children?” he began speaking, but his expression changed within a second. “What? Does the little one have fever? You took him to the doctor and got glucose infused? Is he throwing up continuously? I can’t come immediately mother. There is no bus at this hour. We’ll come by the first bus early tomorrow. Take care of the children...” Mari’s fluster spread to Rasathi.

“Let’s go home at once,..” said she disturbed.

“There is no bus available at this hour dear... the city is flooded with water. We will set out early in the morning. Be a little patient...” said he hiding his anxiety.

It was a sleepless night for the two of them. They set out with bag and baggage at daybreak next day. When they told Pazhani about it he jumped between the sky and the earth.

“The work will get over only on Wednesday. How can you leave in the middle...?”

“Pay us wages for just the days we worked, brother. I worked for seven days and Rasathi for eight days. Pay us accordingly...” said Mari in a pleading tone.

“Only if you work all ten days will you be paid Rs350 a day. If you leave in between, you will not be paid the same amount ” said Pazhani harshly.

“How fair is that? We are leaving because our child is not well... Don’t we deserve to be remunerated for the work we did, having come from so far?”

“Look here, Mari... don’t quarrel. I will give you Rs 2100 at Rs. 300 a day. We have been ordered to pay women lesser. Your wife gets Rs. 2000 at Rs. 250 a day. Here, take your money and leave..”Pazhani counted the Rs 100 notes and pro-offered them.

“What is this Brother Pazhani. We were promised one thing at home and we are given another here. What is the difference between men and women in the work? Didn’t the women share the work equally with men in this water and this stench? Is it fair to pay us less?” asked Rasathi holding her tears in check.

“This is not the time to discuss justice and fairness dear, I am going to pay all the women only this much. Can I pay you as a ‘special’ case?” As he spoke with emphasis on the word ‘special’, Pazhani’s voice bubbled with mischief.

“Look here, brother Pazhani, you don’t need to have that mocking tone. Didn’t we come depending upon you? Pay us fairly. That will be for your good,” Mari toned down his voice.

“What? Are you threatening me?” said Pazhani twisting his moustache.

“I am not threatening. Just asking for justice.”

“I can give you only this much. Do what you can.”

Speaking dismissively, Pazhani began to move away from there. Mari followed him and seized his hand in anger.

“This is not good Brother Pazhani. Don’t throw dust on our livelihood. Give us our dues and we will go away.”

“This is what I can give. Do what you will.” Pazhani withdrew his hand and started walking.

Mari got furious. He lunged in front of Pazhani and caught him by his collar. “If you don’t give me the money now, I will not leave you,” said he, heatedly.

Pazhani did not expect that. He cast away Mari’s hand.

“Hey, Dharma, Ramu, all of you come here fast... This Mari has slapped me on my face...” he lied as he stroked his cheeks and shouted.

From the crowds standing here and there, a few men came running, pushed Mari down and began battering him. Rasathi who tried to intervene got a heavy blow on her back too. Understanding the gravity of the situation, a few volunteers dispersed the crowd. Mari’s lips were ruptured and blood flowed. Somebody helped him and Rasathi into an auto. Cholai put in their baggage with the utensils. The auto sped towards the bus-stop.

### Work Cited

This is a translation of the original written by G. Meenakshi, Editor, Mangayar Malar, in Tamil.